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Faith Garner

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, ltz187@mocs.utc.edu

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More Than Remembering: How Memoirists Recall and Write the Past

Faith Elaine Wilkey Garner

Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
English Department

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Dr. Sarah Einstein
Professor of English
Thesis Director

Dr. Aaron Shaheen
Professor of English
Committee Member

Dr. Sybil Baker
Professor of English
Committee Member

More Than Remembering: How Memoirists Recall and Write the Past

By

Faith Garner

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
an Undergraduate Degree in English
with a concentration in Creative Writing

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Chattanooga, Tennessee

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| CRAFT ESSAY..... | 1 |
| CREATIVE ESSAYS | |
| All Creatures Small..... | 14 |
| Spirit of Snow and Ice..... | 21 |
| Water Music..... | 26 |
| Drive..... | 30 |
| Appoggiatura..... | 33 |
| Flowers..... | 37 |

Introduction

I am over fifty, and unfortunately, I already have the trite affliction of the old. Sometimes, memory fails me. I find myself in my kitchen doing the old lady thing, staring around, trying to remember why I am there. With my writing, I find it is the same. I walk into my childhood only to discover I don't know why I am there. I may begin by trying to remember the dress my grandmother made for me. I may try to discover the reasons for my repeated dream of being chased by a black bear, but my memory dives down side paths and loops back on itself. Finally, I find myself standing in my childhood kitchen, looking around, watching the wallpaper shift from undefined gray to a sunny yellow pattern to a flat white paper laced with flourishing strawberry plants, and I am forced to wonder which wallpaper I need. Why am I there?

“Memoir mines the past, examining it for shape and meaning,” according to Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola. In their book *Tell It Slant*, they state that any memoir “must derive its energy, its narrative drive, from exploration of the past” (94-95). In this essay, I will examine how successful memoirists harness the energy of their own explorations and show how I have used these techniques in my own work.

The Proof is in the Details

Fortunately, many practitioners of the genre are willing to share their own techniques for delving into memory. Mary Karr certainly understands how I can find myself adrift in memory. “[E]veryone gets waylaid by the colossal force of recollection,” she states in her book *The Art of Memoir*. “One minute you're a grown-ass woman, then a whiff of cumin conjures your dad's curry, and a whole door to the past blows open, ushering in uncanny detail” (1). Karr calls these

details “sacred carnality,” and she considers them essential to writing about the past. “Every memoir should brim over with the physical experiences that once streamed in,” she states (71).

This may seem like the classic advice given to every young writer—show, don’t tell—but it is much more than that to Karr. She does suggest that the writer explore every sense when conjuring a memory, but more importantly, she asks the writer to find that other body. She asks the writer to imagine every detail, so that when they are done, they feel like they have been somewhere else. “If you’re really lucky, you found a way to occupy your former self, looking out of that face at your much younger hands” (32).

Mary Karr gives another reason why her sacred carnality is key to a good memoir. Carnal memories allow the writer to “to recount details based on their psychological effects on a reader” (72). Writers should choose the correct details to populate their essay. They must find the ones that have extra meaning because Karr believes that, without details that are infused with the appropriate atmosphere, a writer’s work will be flat and will not communicate the desired theme effectively. Detailed memories, therefore, are not just tools that allow the writer to engage the reader; they also allow the writer to find the memories that will direct the narrative to the place they want the reader to go.

When I began exploring memories of the creek where I spent much of my summer during my early years, I did not see a pattern or understand why I wanted to explore that particular location. I just remembered it as a key place from my childhood. As I dug through my memories of gathering ingredients for the many mud pie recipes I created there, I recalled more than the cool creek water or the squishy silt beneath my feet. I discovered a long-forgotten memory of sun-dappled leaves overhead, a view I could only get by laying on my back. I suddenly recalled days when I didn’t make mud pies; some days, I was lost and sad and unable to play. That

canopy of sparkling leaves was not just a vivid detail. It was evidence of the most important part of my time at the creek. I was too young to understand what I was feeling on those days, but that memory reminded the adult me that the creek was a refuge. It was the first place I visited to forget the pain of neglect. It was the first place I used to lose my loneliness in a world of make-believe friends and situations. My essay “Water Music” became an exploration of more than my childhood playground. It became the account of my desire for love and acceptance and an acknowledgement of the way my imagination created a world where those needs were met with beetles and crayfish and water skimmers.

In her book *Handling the Truth: On the Writing of Memoir*, Beth Kephart also thinks details are important. But again, it is not just the five senses that concern her. “We have to slow down to remember those details. We have to trust that writing ourselves back. . .is going to take us somewhere new” (96). Without the quiet examination of every detail, the writer may not delve deeply enough and may miss the real reason why certain memories demand the writer’s attention. Kephart believes details allow the writer to find the greater pattern in memory (97). This pattern gives the writer and the reader what is necessary for understanding, and memory is much more powerful in its context within a work.

In my essay “Flowers,” I found the greater pattern in my memories when I tried to recall the moment I discovered the flowers I had given to my mother, hidden in the kitchen trash. As I tried to recreate the look of the trash can from my memory, I did have to slow down, remembering the color and the shape of that garbage can and how tall it was as I approached it. I looked down into the can in memory, slowly peering over the edge and trying to remember exactly what I saw that day. Was it the delicate head of the Queen Anne’s Lace, or the ragged end of the stem? As I stared down into that memory, I was able to recall more details than I had

consciously remembered before. I had forgotten that my mother had tried to hide the flowers under layers of newspaper, and this reminded me of several emotional responses that discovery had pulled from me. I had been sad that the flowers I loved had been discarded so carelessly. I had also been embarrassed to realize that this was probably not the only bouquet she had tossed aside. The most surprising thing of all, however, was my memory of wondering how my aunt would have responded if her daughters had given her flowers. If I had not slowed down to fully examine the flowers laying in the kitchen trash, I may not have disinterred that recollection, but that memory is key to my understanding of that moment in time and of my relationship with my mother.

Annie Dillard shares her own take on finding this pattern in memory. In the essay collection *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, Dillard advises writers to “decide two crucial points: what to put in and what to leave out” (143). She goes on to tell of how she chose what to put in her book *An American Childhood*. She put in scenes that explicitly showed her exploration of her city and her interior life because her book was about “a child’s vigor, and originality, and eagerness, and mastery, and joy” (144). She also tells how she chose what she should leave out, including private involvements, anything that might bother her family, or anything that seemed like a grievance (153-156).

In my essay “Spirit of Ice and Snow,” the first few drafts went from having nothing that hinted at my childhood neglect to displaying too much of the dysfunctional workings of my relationship with my mother. The essay is about the way I turned to God, the Spirit of Ice and Snow, to bring love and security into my world. I did, therefore, choose memories that supported the reverence I felt when I was out in the snow. After a few drafts, I realized, however, that I should not show too much about the way my mother, through word or deed, let me know that she

did not really want me in her life. I tried to strike a balance between the two. Sharing the relief I found whenever I was reminded that I was not alone seemed enough to hint at the lack of affection and belonging I battled the entire time I lived in my mother's home. Besides, that constant tension is a harsh reality that did not fit the beauty of snow and ice and the feelings they elicited in me.

Choosing the right sensory details and memories is not the only way a writer might gain control of the writing, however. Sue Silverman uses a maroon scarf, a gift from one of her elicit lovers, to explain her memories in *Love Sick: One Woman's Journey through Sexual Addiction*. This scarf was not simply a symbolic object, as we might expect. Silverman uses it to define her addiction and her recovery from it. In her craft book *Fearless Confessions: A Writer's Guide to Memoir*, Silverman states this scarf allows her narrative persona to use two distinct voices—her addict voice and her sober voice. "These two voices, working together, mirror the conflict," she states. They "deepen and define the protagonist" and allow the plot to unfold for the reader (ch. 5). The emotional impact of this duality is how Silverman develops her memories into a cohesive plot. Without the voice of the addict, we could not understand Silverman's need for the scarf or the sex that exhilarated and shamed her. Without the sober voice of reflection, we could not fully understand how her addictive behavior made her feel or why it was so hard for her to recover from that behavior.

Silverman also suggests that details do not just impact the reader by showing them a memory that touches every sense. "These images also enhance the atmosphere of the piece," she states in *Fearless Confessions*. Memories must be filled with details that allow the reader to understand the "inner state of a character" (ch. 2). Choosing details that match the theme or tone

of the narrative are good. Choosing details that show both the external and internal conflicts of the persona of the piece are better.

Creating two personas within one piece was not something I had considered, but I could see the potential. With that duality in mind, I went back to a piece I had started early in my college career. “All Creatures Small” started out as another exploration into my life as a small child. During workshop, my descriptions of my times with the bugs in my front yard were acclaimed for their sensory detail and lyrical beauty. However, I was told that that was all my story was—a nicely written anecdote from my past. Using two voices, I revisited the piece, allowing the voice of innocence to show the world of bugs, but adding a voice of experience to both frame the piece and show tiny glimpses into the way I felt at that time. This gave the piece a thematic purpose and allowed me to express the first inklings of my desire to leave the oppressive atmosphere of my home. The child did not understand why I wanted to leave; the adult understood very well. This duality of voice allowed me to regain control of the memories, and I felt the essay expressed the underlying theme much more clearly and vividly.

The Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth

Even if I mine my past for myriad sensory details, I still worry about the veracity of my memories. Everyone knows memory is fallible. It is so much a part of our culture that mentioning it will gain you tale after tale of car wrecks inaccurately described or of memory tricks played in high school and college classes. Most of these stories end with “and nobody got the details right,” and none of them reassure me that I can rely on my memory to gain the true experiences of my past.

I am not alone. Almost every memoirist I read mentioned their concerns about this very thing, and they all had their own method of dealing with it. Most are like Karr, who states that intense memories “burn inside us for lifetimes, florid, unforgettable, demanding to be set down” (89). Karr argues vivid details psychologically feel real and true in a way that vague memories do not. They also build trust between the writer and reader because they are “rendered with physical clarity” (75). She states that memories created in a state of “hyperarousal” are the most vivid because we create sense impressions that are stronger (75). Vivid details register as truth to the reader, and this leads to something that is key to a successful memoir—trust between the reader and the writer.

Several writers have their own way to check the facts in their writing. Memoirist Abigail Thomas often asks her sister Judy to look over her work because of her prodigious memory. In her book *Thinking about Memoir*, Thomas shows the reader an example of how this might play out, describing a scene from her childhood, then sharing her sister’s corrections. Thomas doesn’t know why her sister’s memory is so much better than her own, but she seems to rely on this ability to help her be as accurate as possible (ch. 3). Many other writers have similar advice, sending writers to interview family and friends who shared their past experiences.

Not everyone agrees with talking to family or friends about their past, however. William Zinsser describes writing about his paternal grandmother in the introduction to *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. She was a stern woman who was full of Germanic maxims and a love of “telling people off” (11). After reading his memoir, however, his mother came to him because she felt he had gotten the grandmother wrong. Zinsser acknowledges the possibility that his mother was more correct, “[b]ut she was like that to *me*—and that’s the only truth a

memoir writer can work with” (12). Understanding that family members may not always be the best source of corroboration, then, is also important.

Other writers suggest other “fact-checking” methods that may lead to truth in memory. “If you want to write about your childhood, don’t settle for your memories,” advise the *Tell It Slant* authors Miller and Paola. “Check out magazines. . .watch Nickelodeon reruns. . .look up the key songs, plays, films, and news events of those years” (73). They state that this type of research will solidify your childhood world.

My essay “Appoggiatura,” is all about music and the ways in which shared musical interest drew me to my high school sweetheart. As I wrote the first draft, specific songs and artists easily came to mind, but after workshopping the piece, I realized I needed more. I did not simply delve deeper into my memory to find additional songs. I researched hit songs and artists of the time. I looked through lists of songs by my boyfriend’s favorite musicians, and I was surprised to discover that my memory had been fine, but it had been woefully short of reality. Although I did not use all the artists and songs I rediscovered during my exploration, I did use some. More importantly, however, those musical “facts” improved the essay by putting me in the right frame of mind. It had been many years since I had been the young girl who adored hippie artists and their folksy tunes. Going back through all the music, not just the songs that easily came to mind, immersed me in the past and reminded me of how it felt to be naïve and desperately infatuated with a boy who didn’t really care about me, and the voice of my persona changed. The narrator became the girl I used to be.

Eileen Simpson, author of three memoirs, shared her experience of writing her book *Orphans* in the collection of essays *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. She did not want to rely exclusively on her own experience as an orphan. Instead, she did historical

research to see how orphans had lived in a variety of time periods. She interviewed orphans who had lived in an orphanage that she had passed as a child on her way to the dentist. She even read autobiographies of writers who had been orphaned in their childhood. The research had very little to do with her own experience, but Simpson needed distance from which to write her own memories, and the research provided it. Memory can sometimes carry emotions that overwhelm the writer. Simpson suggests research as a way to discover truth in emotion as well as fact.

Both essays about my early childhood needed this type of emotional distance, and the research I did for both “All Creatures Small” and “Flowers” was a surprising help with that. Examining images of wildflowers and my childhood insect companions gave me a buffer zone in which to write about those very early years. I did not have to delve too deeply into those memories at first. I was able to start with the remembered texture of a flower or the buzzing of bees. This gave me a chance to ease into those times and to wait until I was ready to write about the more difficult parts of those memories.

Still other writers don’t believe in fact-checking or introducing “facts” into a memoir. Annie Dillard warns writers that “[y]our batch of snapshots will both fix and ruin your memory of your travels, or your childhood, or your children’s childhood” (157). Once you see the photograph, it will forever alter your memories because it replaces the memory with an image from that memory. I found this both realistic and reassuring. Since I have very few photographs from my early childhood, I am relieved to discover this lack may benefit me.

Finally, memoirists offered reassurance about things that are not as clear or perfectly verified as the writer would like. Suzanne Paola said, “It was an enormous relief to. . .realize that the lack of answers—the evasions, the uncertainties, the whole process—was a story in itself”

(71). Dinty Moore reassures us, “[A]ll we promise the reader is that we have done our absolute best to fact-check our memories, and that we have tried our darndest to be accurate” (11).

Most readers understand the dubious nature of memory, so my fear of inaccuracy should not be an issue. Clear details provide some guarantee of truth and, more importantly, carnality builds memories that feel real and true to the reader. This trust is imperative to a successful memoir.

Conclusion

Back in the kitchen, I begin to make a cup of tea and memory takes me again. I remember the Russian tea my mother discovered from a church member one Christmas. Its sugary sweetness was overpowering and fortifying. I remember my father proudly producing a large jar with a screw-on lid for our first exploration of “sun tea” and the curious mixture of hot and cold when he added the ice and gave us our first glass. I remember my first trip to a Chinese restaurant where I drank hot tea for the first time, loving the feel of the tea cup in my hand, even though I was in college.

Each memory, if explored in the way these memoirists have encouraged, will produce sensory memories or carnal sensuality. They might lead me to other memories, and I might even find myself far away from the initial impulse of recollection.

I am not as fearful of this now, however. Memories do not burst forth from the past, fully functional as an element in a memoir. I know I must work to add flesh to the bones. I must work to choose the details that best suit the memory’s place in my work. I must—no matter how much I love the memory or the writing or the word—leave some things for another time or for my

personal collection. I must understand that not everything I write is important to an essay, no matter how important it is to me.

Finally, I must not worry about the validity of my memories or my feelings about them. Because I understand that I must ask myself many questions while writing memoir, but the most important question is best voiced by Abigail Thomas in *A Three Dog Life*. “Is memory property?” she asks. “If two people remember something differently, is one of them wrong? Wasn’t my memory of a memory also real?”

I now have the knowledge to answer that question with a definitive yes.

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All Creatures Small

My very first friends were the creepy crawlies. They crept along the bumpy brown siding of my childhood home. They crawled in the dark recess between the poured concrete of the front porch proper and the cement block steps that stood in front of the door. Some created cocoons or webs or lived in the dark crevices between the siding and the side of the porch.

That may sound sweet or endearing or bring to mind tiny fingers rescuing earthworms from sidewalks or butterflies from a net, but the creatures I observed and held in my hands were much more than a curiosity to me.

There was always a gray period of anticipation in the Spring. In between the rare beauty of Tennessee snow and the bright pink cherry and purple lilac blossoms, I waited. At some point, I would become a creature of the outdoors, no longer confined to the five-room house in which I lived. When I became a creature of the wilderness, I was not just tolerated; I felt accepted. An integral part of their world. It was a special kind of belonging in that place of creeping, buzzing things. So, I would wait for the first stalks of green and the anticipated expulsion into my playground.

For all that she did not want me underfoot, my mother did want me to be safe. There were strict boundaries set for my outside excursions. When I was very young, the front porch was the boundary past which I could not stray. It was barely four feet wide and about twice as long. Just a stopping place before feet met the earth. It may sound small, but I was a child, so it was plenty large enough for me. The sun shone in one corner of the porch almost the entire day, so in the chill of Spring air, I could sit on the sun-touched concrete and be warm. If I got too hot in the summer months, my bare legs and arms and feet could pull damp coolness from the concrete in

the other corner of the porch. I would stretch along the bottom step and rest my head on the step above, my arms a sufficient pillow against the hardness.

But I did not sleep. Instead, I visited with the occupants of the nook between the blocks and the near side of the porch--the daddy longlegs. There, in the space that never got the full force of the sun, they would hang in single file, no more than five or six in a row, and they would sway and crawl and fascinate. I wasn't afraid of them, even when one of my brothers told me they were spiders and would bite.

They did not look like spiders. As I sat or sprawled nearby, they seemed too dainty to show an interest in biting. As I watched, they even seemed a bit prissy with their long, segmented legs and their curious bobbing walk. If they came close, I would allow them to crawl onto my hand and would watch the feeler legs touch tentatively along the path of my fingers, across my palm and up my arm. This gave me a very close view of their faces, and I thought their mouths looked like whiskers, so they were all boys to me. There were large ones and small ones, so I came to call them in order: daddy longlegs, granddaddy longlegs and great granddaddy longlegs. And in this way, they became a sort of family that I watched with longing.

In my family, we did not sit so close together. We did not walk together or seek each other out unless it was time for dinner. But the Longlegs family seemed connected, as if each member of their unusual family was valued and necessary to their survival. Even though I thought it would be better to live out in a tree or among the grass, they seemed to prefer their dark corner and each other's company. Their long halting legs never carried them further than behind the steps or under the dark brown shingles of my house.

It seemed an unlikely haven for creatures of the earth, but then again, almost all the other creatures I watched seems to scurry around, always in a rush. Not the Longlegs. They moved

along the concrete and siding in the wake of some mystical calm. I loved to watch them, and I think I was a little envious of their seeming contentedness. They had something I did not have. Something. Something. Something, but what?

* * *

When I was a little older, I was allowed to explore the patch of yard just in front of the porch. This gave me a new angle from which to explore the porch, and it introduced a new creature into my playground. The first time I saw a woolly worm, it was crawling up the edge of the wall where porch met house. At first, I wasn't sure if I liked it. Its brown and black striped body was not soft. When I brought a tentative fingertip to its back, I discovered that it was very prickly. Still, it was so fat and wobbly, it made me think of a stuffed animal, so I was happy to allow it to explore. I watched it wander around the porch. Even if I became distracted or lost track of it for a moment, it just kept right on, shuffling along the siding or the concrete. Constantly moving, constantly searching for something. Food. Warmth. Another woolly worm. I was not sure what compelled it to wander so long or so continuously. Was there something to find, if only I knew what it was?

That night at dinner, I talked about the brown and black fuzzy worm I had discovered, and Daddy told me a wonderful thing about them. They could predict the future—or the weather, at least. He said that people looked at them and could tell if the winter was going to be cold or mild. Suddenly, my affectionate stuffed-animal caterpillar turned into a magical creature with special powers. The next time one arrived on the porch, I watched its progress carefully. Maybe it was not searching for anything. Maybe he was simply moving around the porch gathering data for his important prediction. What clues did he see and smell and hear as he voyaged along the wall of the porch? I watched and hoped to figure out his magic, because even though I did not

like the prickly feel of him against my fingertip, I wanted that touch of magic, that something special that would make me extra special, not just a brown-haired girl who wandered the porch and adjacent patch of grass, because she had no place else to go.

* * *

Once I was old enough to go out into my front yard, I met even more companions. Earthworms, stink bugs, caterpillars, click beetles. All of them explored the yard, much as I did. They wandered here and there, looking for things of interest. A leaf here. A sticky piece of sap there. Some preferred the earth, and some preferred the trees. Still others, like the ants, seemed comfortable in both worlds, and they would easily traverse the divide between land and sky. The most unusual of these travelers between worlds were the large yellow and brown grasshoppers. I would chase them along the tall plants that were left unfettered along the edge of our yard. The tall tiger lily leaves, native grasses and leafy wildflowers were a bounty of greens they couldn't ignore. They would leap from plant to plant, eating and walking along a high blade of grass as if they were unafraid of the unstable nature of their platform. Their bodies were made up of hard plates and hinges, like tiny machines. Their large flat eyes never seemed to notice me, but eventually, tired of my constant attention, they would jump into the air in a leap that startled and delighted me. Their wings made a raspy, dry sound as they flew away, far beyond my reach, but still, I wanted to follow. I knew what would happen if I did, though. My mother kept a switch on top of the refrigerator, a thin branch no bigger around than the tall grass in which I played. So, I stood at the edge of the yard and watched them go.

* * *

When I was allowed into the side yards, I discovered another traveler of grass and sky—the June Bugs. They only came to our yard once a year, and I thought of them as migratory

jewels, honored guests that would spend days in my yard. I don't recall where I thought they came from. Perhaps, I likened them to the birds who followed a prescribed path from place to place. I do know that I always considered them a bit magical. Most of the other bugs who lived in my grassy kingdom were dull hidden colors. Not the June bugs. Their dark green bodies did not blend in with the grass. They seemed mockingly brilliant in comparison.

I found their humpbacked bodies beautiful, their short blunt antennae whimsical, their barbed legs fascinating. Their shape reminded me of a prehistoric creature—miniature dinosaurs. Maybe instead of a different world, they were visiting from a different time.

I would chase them through the grass until I was able to capture one. Then, I would enjoy the prickly sensation as it crawled along my skin, and I would test the limits of their dexterity, tilting my hand up and up to see if they would slide down or at least stop crawling. They never did. I was amazed that they could hang onto my tiny fingers, even if I turned them upside down. They were magical creatures, so I was not surprised that they did not stay long. One day, I would wake up, and they would be gone, their departure as sudden as their arrival. I would look and look, but there would be no trace of the great green bodies in the air around me, and I would call goodbye out into the yard, feeling certain that they could somehow hear me. As if they lurked just out of my view, waiting for me to follow.

And even though I knew I couldn't, I wanted to go.

* * *

When I was older, I still could not venture to the creeks that flowed on either side of our property, but I could venture all along the edge of our property. So, instead of cooling my feet in the water, as I longed to do, I learned to wait out the heat of the day in the shadow of a large

walnut tree on the furthest edge of our yard. I would lean against its trunk and watch the bumblebees in the white clover patch that thrived there.

As they moved from blossom to blossom, their large roly-poly bodies were slow to lift and slow to drift through the sky. In a strange way, this made them seem lighter than air to me, like the wispy white seeds of the dandelions. They were more graceful and less hurried than the smaller honeybees. They methodically travelled from one blossom to the next. Once they became covered in pollen, their legs and body bulging with their collected treasure, they would drift away on the wind, disappearing through the large honeysuckle bush that grew in the shade of the tree.

I wanted to go there, too, to see what was beyond. Surely, they went somewhere besides that bush, through some secret passage that led into a world where their large swollen bodies gained their unusual buoyancy, so they could return to travel for a time amongst the clover. What would happen if I followed? Would I transform into a roly-poly body, impossibly light, bobbing on the air like a circus balloon? Or would I sink to the bottom of some pollen-covered liquid, unable to inhale their magic?

Perhaps, I reasoned, I could not follow. Instead of tumbling into their world like Alice, I might be unable to pass into that special place, trapped because I belonged there even less than I belonged in my own home. I did not want to find out.

So instead of following, I rested against the tree or sprawled in the grass, listening to the heavy buzzing of the bumbles as they worked around me. The afternoon heat lulled me into a dreamy lethargy. I became attuned to the vibrations of their world instead of my own. I would sit and listen to them for the entire afternoon, watching as they floated from one tiny white flower to the next.

Or I would drift away into a cloud of imaginings, as the low drone of my companions reassured me. I would dream of being a fairy or a princess. I would be the magical savior of my world or the worthy ruler, loved by all the land. I would fly on the backs of bumbles or unicorns. I would fight against dragonflies or win over the larger dragons of the air because I understood that they did not mean to hurt anyone with their fiery breath.

Or I would truly doze, lulled to sleep as I stared across the plain of white flowers, certain that if I stayed very still, I might awaken in another world, a place where I might drift on the air or fly through it, a place where anything was possible.

My childhood companions were more than a curiosity or a way to waste away the day. They were my friends. They hovered around me, protecting me, inviting me to a world where I could pretend, at least for a little while, that I might one day find a place where I was special and loved and belonged.

Spirit of Snow and Ice

In the lower part of East Tennessee, winter is not very different from the seasons that precede and follow it. The autumn leaves eventually disappear, raked into piles and then carried to the back for compost, and once those leaves are gone, the barren trees rise up out of the ground just as starkly in November as they do in February. When I was a child, the crisp air of fall felt the same as it did after the weatherman declared winter's official arrival.

But there were a few weeks in January that were unusually cold, and those weeks were magical to me. True winter in Tennessee brought with it wonderful, incredible, special things.

I loved the cold weather, but I had grown accustomed to spending my days outside. I missed getting lost in the world I knew, and I would often stand at the big picture window in my living room, waiting for the best part of winter to arrive. It wasn't an unpleasant wait. From there, I could watch the birds as they scavenged for food. Red birds and blue jays would puff up like pretty round Christmas ornaments on the bare branches. The brown remnants of my green grassy yard would lure them down to earth, and their bright colors showed up like splashes of life in a desert of dead weeds, brown leaves and other things left behind. I used to wonder if angel wings looked like bird wings, but I decided the bird's wings were too sharp and strong to be heavenly. Angel wings had to be soft and quiet and ladylike because they were good, not bad.

But I loved the way the birds shifted in mid-air, their wings forming acute angles as they lifted and dropped, swerved and swelled, flared and flicked. They would land softly on the ground, suddenly jab at the earth with a pointy beak and thrust back up into the sky again in less than a minute. I wondered what it would feel like, moving in the air that way. It was miraculous in its own way.

The wait for the day when my breath formed a haze on the window was not an unpleasant one because of the birds, and that hazy reward was worth the wait. I did not always have paper or coloring books, and my crayons were worn down to dull nubs within the first weeks of school. But my finger tip was the perfect tool for making pictures in that breathy fog on glass. I would draw all sorts of things there: sailboats that slowly disappeared as the fog of my breath obscured its voyage on frothy waves, trees and leaves that scattered with a swipe of my palm, cats with long tails and dogs with funny noses who would fade as I stood and blew on them, snuffing them out in a moment. I could draw and draw until my breath was short, and my fingers were numb. The window was a miracle of unlimited possibilities, and the puffs of air and tiny fingertip barely made a sound.

* * *

We rarely saw more than one snow a year, but when it came it was usually several inches deep, and it would last for days. Once the cold deepened, I knew it wouldn't be long before the sky would turn a heavy shade of steel gray. I would go to bed as an ordinary girl child, but when I awoke, I was someone else. In a world transformed by snow and ice, no one remained the same. My father did not have to rush off to work because it would take time for the snow plows to reach us. My brothers and I would stay home from school for the same reason, and my mother would laugh and smile and seem happy to have us all home.

The trees, the road, the boney branches of the forsythia and crape myrtle, the tall outstretched arms of the black cherry tree—all familiar, yet not familiar at all. It was like a prayer made solid. The world became silent and hushed. No loud angry voices. No screen doors slamming. No truck engines on the highway, shifting gears as they climbed the mountain road. Just the low murmur of voices from the kitchen and the occasional rasp of a blue jay as he

chased others away from the bread crumbs my dad put out in a tin pie plate. That was the sacred nature of snow—its ability to make my home a quiet and peaceful haven.

In my young years, my only experience with church was a raucous calamity of shouts and singing, thumping and clapping, but it was the sanctuary of the snow that brought God's presence into my life, and I felt a special gratitude for the God who created such a thing. Even when I was very young, I understood the special gift of this earthly transubstantiation, and I accepted it with as much reverence as a young child could. I bundled up and went out into the world to find the mysteries left for me there.

One year, I followed the tracks left by a tiny creature until they disappeared under a layer of new snow. Another year, I wondered around the yard, staring at my feet as I listened to the perfect sound they made when they pierced the icy crust of the frozen snow and delved into the soft layer underneath. One year, I looked up as the snow came down, seeing the crystalline shapes of each flake for the first time. I learned to catch the flakes with my glove, fascinated by the intricate patterns that were exposed against the dark wool before they melted away. These, I decided, were from the wings of angels because these feathers were so soft and delicate and pure. I looked up past the falling snow, hoping to catch a glimpse, but I could see nothing beyond the white spill of miracle. They flew too high.

* * *

Rarely, we would have an ice storm instead of snow. The world would undergo an even deeper transformation. The ice would accentuate the shapes of the trees and bushes instead of cloaking them. The spindly branches of the smaller trees and bushes would bend gracefully under the weight of the ice, and the sturdier branches would meld together into spikes, their tips decorated with icicles—a sparkling light-filled tinsel better than anything we could toss onto the

Christmas tree. Everything became more solid and heavy. Even our house would seem weighted down and secured.

On those days, we often had a special breakfast of Daddy's hamburger gravy and Mama's biscuits. Daddy would cook the hamburger meat, as Mama sifted the flour and cut in the lard. Daddy would add flour to the cast iron skillet, as Mama placed the biscuits on the biggest sheet pan we had. He would step aside to allow her to place the long pan into the oven, all the while adding pepper and sugar to the rue, tasting and adding until it was just right, all the while judging the moment when he would pour water into the skillet and transform the solid into a colloidal treat that was warm and spicy and sweet. I remember the first time I was allowed to pull a kitchen chair close to the stove, climbing up into it so I could pour the water from a large round bowl as Daddy quickly blended it in. When the gravy was bubbly, and the biscuits were golden, we all sat down to eat. The smell of Daddy's gravy and Mama's biscuits filled the air with more than sweet aroma. It was the luxurious smell of belonging. The rare steamy wealth of connection. The sweet savory gravy, fluffy biscuits, and blend of disparate voices would fill my belly with a warmth that I wanted to last forever. Too quickly, however, that feeling would disappear, melting away under the rush of work and school and church.

* * *

The rarest part of a Tennessee winter were days when the temperatures were colder than cold, too cold for snow. The sky was hard, and if the wind blew, it felt harsh and rough against my skin if I ventured outside. On those days, I had to stand back from my usual space in front of the big picture window because the cold would creep in around its edges and make my teeth chatter. Instead, I stood or sat close to the coal stove for warmth. I could not touch the window from there, but I could see it easily. The frost along the bottom of the window and halfway up

each side reminded me of the intricate patterns of the snowflakes caught on my glove. Angel feathers. Sacred crystals. On the window, they found rest, each tiny feather of frost touching just the tip of the next one, and the next one, and the next.

I would look at the clusters of snowy lace until I found the incomplete formations and special crooked imperfections. I would follow these unusual structures as they rose along the edge of the window, collapsing upon each other until only one tiny crusty line continued the climb toward the top of the window. I would follow the zigzag line to its end—its random course reminding me of the path I made as I listened to the crunch of snow or the trail I followed in search of the unknown mouse or vole. I followed the ice until it reached its destination--a lone crystal, perfect and symmetrical except for the long thin thread of ice that connected it to the others below. A gift from the Maker of Snow and Ice, a picture drawn by his powerful hand to remind me that, even if I was the only one who worshipped in the silent solitude of a snowy day, even if I was the only one who looked for angels in a snowy sky, even if I was the only one who noticed patterns in the lacy frost, I was cared for. I was loved. I was not alone.

Water Music

My first memory is of laughter. I stood at our screen door, chest-high to the kick panel, tiny fingers grasping the horizon between thin metal and mesh. The steady mist, a gift from the rain outside, played along my arms and face. I remember the weight of my eyelashes as the tiny droplets coalesced on their tips. When I blinked, I would feel a tiny explosion of coolness fall onto my cheek. I remember closing my eyes so I could better feel the cool path of each raindrop as it traveled down my cheek, followed my jawline for just a bit before falling onto my chest. Other droplets formed along my arms, tickling me as they splashed my skin. That is why I laughed. I don't know how old I was then—maybe one, maybe two. Even after the door was closed and I was taken away from the joy of the rain, I continued laughing. I remembered the rain drops and the way they made me feel.

* * *

The tiny creek next to our house was my summer place. I was probably three or four then, and unless there had been a recent rain, I could walk back and forth across the creek on rock paths, hardly ever getting wet. A large tree grew just a few feet away from the edge of the upper bank, and the myriad nooks and crannies made by its root system—partially exposed by a long-gone flood--were my cupboards. I would store leaves and wildflowers and berries there, and I would spend most of my day making feasts for the creatures who shared my tiny world.

There was a crawfish that skittered under rocks. He would occasionally wave to let me know he was there. The beetles that shared my cupboards were large, black, shiny things that didn't mind if I moved them gently away from my gathered ingredients. They always seemed interested in what I had gathered, and I would give them clear directions on where to find the poke berries or dandelions, just in case they wanted to gather some for themselves. As I piled

rocks to make a hearth, the roly-polies I uncovered would curl up into tiny grey balls or scurry into a crevice they had made in the earth. The water skimmers would dart and slide across the still water, their feet dimpling the surface as if it were a thick plastic sheet. Every time I dipped my hands in the pool, I wondered if I would feel it, the magical spell that allowed them to walk on water. And I was always disappointed when my hands slid into the cool fluid world without resistance.

There was a rock that was just concave enough to serve as my mixing bowl. I would gather the final ingredient by pulling and tugging the sandy dirt into piles with a large stick. As my fingers scooped it up and placed it on the rock, I would already be planning the day's meals. A smaller stick was my mixer, and I would carefully pour small handfuls of water onto the rock until the mud batter was just the right consistency. Sturdy leaves were serving platters for the mud cakes I formed. And all the while, the water skimmers would dance along the water, waiting for their supper.

Before coming to the cool bank of the creek, I would spend time gathering what I could: wild strawberries, cottonwood fluff, cockle burrs and foxtails. Acorns and wild onions were rarer. If I was lucky, I might even find a few unusual seed pods or some grass seeds that looked like grain. I would use the large fan-shaped leaves that I called elephant ears as pouches, and I would fill them with anything that might make an unusual seasoning for the dark earthen cakes I would eventually present to my companions. I would crush and stir and sprinkle, rarely stopping until I heard my mother calling and had to go back inside.

There were days, though, when I would do no gathering. I would simply lie flat on the earthen beach of that tiny sea and stare up through the curtain of leaves that sheltered me. The wind would shift, and the sun would project ever-changing patterns on the water, the leaves, and

me. On those days, the cool dampness under my back would sooth me in a way that I did not understand. On those days, I felt like a large black beetle scuttling among the roots of the world, hoping to find something I didn't have. On those days, I lay on the earth unmoving, barely daring to breathe, waiting.

* * *

I was probably eight or nine, maybe ten. I knew now that playing outside was not a gift; it was a banishment, but I loved the woods behind my home, so I gladly went out to explore. I had long ago left behind my place in the roots of the walnut tree. Now, I was old enough to explore all the way back through the woods to the river, and I had found another tree. Its main trunk was straight and tall, but it had one large branch that sharply turned and ran parallel to the ground. Two smaller branches stretched up to the sky, looking just like a swing. The seat branch was high up, so I had to climb a bit before I could sit between the two upright limbs. Of course, it didn't really swing, but if I rocked back and forth, I could make it sway. Usually, though, I simply sat on that high branch and closed my eyes and listened. I knew many of the birds who sang to me: red bird, robin, wren, crow. If I was still and did not sway, I might hear the rustle of the brown thrasher who lived in the nearby brambles. I would hear his erratic foraging and open my eyes slowly so I could watch. I loved the deep brown color of his back and tail as he hopped along the ground. I thought his speckled breast was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I found him fascinating, picking up leaves with his beak and tossing them to the side in a haphazard way, hoping to surprise bugs hidden beneath.

One day, as I sat on my swing tree, eyes closed and listening, I heard a different kind of rustling. I had never experienced the subtle music of approaching rain before, and at first, I didn't realize what it was. I opened my eyes and watched the leaves of a distant tree flutter in the

wind. Then, the next tree did the same. Not just wind, I realized. Something else. And then, I smelled it, the fresh green smell of summer rain. I stood and hurried down the branch, jumped to the ground and headed toward home. At first, I tried to hurry, instinctively seeking shelter from the rain. But there was no worn path in our woods. Each step had to be chosen carefully. It only took a few moments to realize that the rain was going to catch up with me. I slowed. Then, I stopped. It didn't matter. It was just rain.

I closed my eyes and lifted my face to the sky, ready for the onslaught of a driving rain. Instead, I was surprised that I could barely make out the feel of individual droplets on my face. The rain did not assault me; it saturated me. I breathed in the scent of damp wood and rich brown earth and felt my lungs expand under the heavy wet weight of my shirt. I exhaled slowly. I felt my shoulders relax and lower, my arms lifting slightly, pulling away from my body, palms turned upward.

Caught in a moment of exquisite sensation, I surrendered to the warm flow of water as it fell down my body. I became real and solid under the weight of the rain, but as I stood there, in unconscious supplication, I did not really understand what I was hoping to find hidden underneath.

Still, I waited.

And somewhere deep inside me, I felt the laughter as it began to rise.

Drive

My father had gotten the car cheap and rebuilt it for me. I didn't mind the worn seat covers or the smell of engine oil that was ever-present when I got in. The car was almost as old as I was, and for a car, sixteen was pretty old. I had never dreamed how important it would become to me, but on the nights when I felt claustrophobic and trapped inside the tiny brown house that was my family home, it became much more than a car. Running one hand in a gentle caress along the hard, cracked plastic of the steering wheel and looking out over the glaringly white hood of my red car gave me something special—especially when I escaped into the night.

The glow of the dashboard, a perfect night light for a teenager, reassured me that I was able to leave. The roar of the powerful engine felt like a greeting. I became wrapped up in the noisy cocoon of my old Mustang. All of it felt like a warm blanket—hearing the crunch of the tires on gravel, the shift in the engine as I reversed, the thunk of the gear shift as it hit its mark and lit up the D in the floor panel.

The crickets and cicadas called to me. Come out into the wild. Come out and forget what she wants you to be. Come out and find your way.

Sometimes, if I was too impatient to wait, I would move down the driveway before pausing to open all my car windows. Most of the time, however, I would use the stiff crank handles to roll down the long windows of the two-door before following the mismatched white hood on my red car toward the main road.

The driveway wasn't that long, and the highway wasn't that far away. I could see it from my bedroom window. But the slow creep up the gravel road, avoiding some potholes and slowly rolling in and out of others made it seem much further. I didn't mind. By the time I sat at the top

of my drive, I was more than ready for the smooth feel of the pavement on the highway and the peaceful anonymity of the night.

I always turned left at the top of the road. The tight curvy path leading up the mountain did not have what I needed. Instead, I would turn left onto the highway, then left again so I could slowly pass the banks of muted houses, some already dark and lifeless, and through the town proper--a street of now-quiet storefronts: a five-and-dime, a small grocery, the farmer's supply.

I would drive across the railroad and finally reach my destination: another highway--the road that led to and from town. I had two choices then. I could turn left and drive through hilly roads and over bridges. There were times when I liked that drive, with its silvery strips of water. It was a peaceful, quiet meandering way.

More often, though, I would turn right, driving past the car dealership and the gas station, past the last roads leading past the last clustered houses. The land would fall away from the raised highway in both directions then, and the darkness of the unlit landscape would make the sky seem brighter, the stars clearer, and I would finally feel able to breathe.

Behind the scattered trees that stretched up in dark silhouette against the sky, the map of the world my mother wanted for me, expected of me, stretched out in rutted gravel roads and tiny cramped houses. I did not turn down those roads. I never would.

I stayed on the highway as it rushed around hills and whipped past the tree line, past the boundary between where I was and where I longed to be. I would breathe in the green scent of leaves and the dark, damp smell of tilled earth, and I would slowly begin to remember what I wanted. I would remember who I wanted to be.

When I reached my favorite straightaway, I would stretch my foot just enough to send my car soaring. It was too fast, but no one was there to tell me to slow, no one was there to remind

me that I was poor and female and trapped in the world into which I was born. As I let the speed of my passage whip my long brown hair around my head, I swatted away the voices inside my head and let the road carry me away.

Appoggiatura

Appoggiatura. The dissonance in a chord created by a note that is one step off. The tension that is resolved when that note steps up or down to find its place within the chord. A musical device that often makes listeners cry. Poignant. Bittersweet.

Like holding my daughter after we argue.

Like my isolation at the family dinner table until my dad tells a joke that makes us all laugh.

Like memories of my first love.

We met just before high school, and we remained friends even after he left for college. He was the first boy who talked to me about things other than the difficulty of a math test or an upcoming football game. He was funny, intelligent, opinionated, and attractive. But if I think about him, all these years later, the memories that come most readily to mind are all about his music. Everything else seems distant, secondary, gray-washed.

Perhaps, music is so much a part of my memories because it is what drew us together. The only classes we shared during high school were music classes. I remember sitting at the end of the back row of altos, so I would always be at the perfect angle to watch him in the tenor section. Our bodies faced the conductor, but we saw each other there. Even in a room full of other musicians, I knew his voice.

After rehearsal or play practice, we would often ride home together. The darkness surrounding us on those long quiet roads invited intimacy. Sometimes, during those long drives, we simply let the music take us where it would. There was a type of surrender in those moments, when we did not have to do anything, say anything, or be anything but present in the ebb and flow of song.

Other times, the radio would orchestrate our conversations. We would share our insecurities, our frustrations, our plans. With Queen playing in the background, it was hard to pretend we weren't capable of changing the world. With the songs of Carol King speaking to us, it was impossible to imagine that we were anything less than soulmates.

If he was driving, we would stay in the car, even after we arrived at my house. We would talk until my mother flashed the porch light, letting us know it was time for me to come inside. On those nights, the music played on in quiet descant to our intertwining voices. On those nights, there was no good night kiss. There was rarely anything more than a hasty goodbye before I hopped out of the car. But when he got home, he would call, and we would continue where we had left off when the lights began their flickering in the dark.

If I was driving, we would go to a special place deep in the woods near his home. Once there, our only accompaniment would be the soft sound of cicadas drifting into the open car windows, calming the emotions and fears we shared with each other, lulling us into a deeper level of intimacy. Back then, he knew more about me than anyone else, and his acceptance of me was more than intimate; it was essential--like the syncopated beat of my heart and the subtle rhythmic whoosh of my breathing. Eventually, the conversation would dissolve as our hands drifted along a shoulder, an arm, a thigh, and our own silent music would grow too loud to ignore.

But even on those nights, when I arrived home, I would call him. On those nights, I could not imagine a future without his music and him. Because when I was with him, no matter where or how, even if our connection was over miles of telephone line, I always felt a little high.

Like that first rush of sugar from a fingertip of stolen frosting.

Like the anticipation of dipping my feet into the lake.

Like the first pulse of pleasure when we kissed.

He was a kind of addiction, a craving, a haunting tune I couldn't get out of my head. Maybe that is why, even now, a Harry Chapin song always has the echo of his voice in the background. Or why certain John Denver songs make me a little sad. Maybe that is why a few notes of a James Taylor song on the radio can make the memory of grass beneath my fingertips as real as the steering wheel beneath my hand.

Just a few notes and I remember:

The time we sat on a park bench, watching the herons fly, his hand lightly stroking my knee.

The time I tried to learn to play the guitar by watching his long fingers move along the frets.

The time I sat next to him at the piano, sipping wine. Me, tapping out the melody, while he played the chords underneath. Our thighs, upper arms and fingertips brushing against each other in a kind of innocent seduction that lost its innocence with each sip of melody.

But the reality of our relationship was very different from those perfect memories. He would suddenly be too busy for long conversations. He would tire of me. He would become distracted by a new someone else. I don't know why I let him drift in and out of my life in that way. I guess I always thought of his absence from my life as just a temporary dissonance. The note that was one step off. I knew it would eventually resolve itself. The tension would end, and he would be with me again.

I knew because even during those times of separation, there would be nights when he would call, needing to talk, asking me to help him think. The next day I knew we would avoid eye contact, pretend it never happened, hold the hand of another. But I did not turn him away.

For me, the rise and fall of his voice on the phone was simply a different kind of melody. It formed the underlying structure of my world, and I couldn't turn away from it. I didn't want to.

Like meeting the eyes of a stranger while she shares a personal story that makes me love her.

Like going to my first opera and spending most of the evening with my hand on my chest, fighting the vocal vibrations that resonated there, while the beauty of the music overwhelmed me.

Like holding him in my arms every time he came back to me, ignoring the pain his absence had created.

One of my last memories of him is of a late summer night. Sitting in lawn chairs in my front yard, I watched the sun settle behind the green mountains while he played his guitar. Following the path of the lightning bugs as they climbed into the darkening sky, I understood their flickering luciferin lights, their otherworldly warning. This time would be no different from the others. He would not stay.

Yet, despite their warning, I let his soft voice and the rhythmic strumming of his fingers on the silver strings of his guitar enthrall me. Like a tame bird, I sat beside him. I could not go when music stirred the air currents in a way that made me unwilling to fly.

Flowers

I am thinking of flowers as I walk the yard, today. They are all around me, my childhood beauties. The deep yellow tubes of the dandelion. The prolific clusters of white clover. The tiny, delicate purple flutes of henbit. The lawnmower will come, and they will go away soon, so I reach down without guilt and pluck a bouquet. I will bring them inside with me, and their sweet colors will decorate my life for just a bit longer.

* * *

I fell in love with them when I was young. I didn't know they were weeds. I would pick bouquet after bouquet of them and bring them to Mama. The first time, she made quite a production of my gift, getting a small drinking glass from the cabinet and filling it with water, placing the flowers in it as best she could, placing them on the kitchen table for all to see.

She loved flowers. Every year, her one extravagance was the store-bought pansies and marigolds meant for the bare earth set off by bricks that hugged the front of our house. She would dig up the hard-packed earth and plant them in straight rows, but we couldn't afford to buy enough to fill the large beds. I always thought the flowers looked lonely in the middle of all that brown dirt. They would grow, but not enough to mask the emptiness of the plots.

On the other side of those bricks, the yard was full of abundant blooms, and I didn't understand why she spent money and time on those spindly flowers when the others were free and ever present. The tiny violets and Queen Anne's lace that edged our yard were so beautiful to me. I knew she didn't love them as I did, but because she loved flowers, I would bring her bouquets of all sizes, and she would thank me for them. Her reaction wasn't the same as that first magical time, of course. It never was with Mama, but I brought them to her, anyway.

* * *

Today, I bring my ragtag gathering into the house, and as my husband cranks up the lawnmower, I begin to clip the bottoms of the tiny stems and arrange them in a teapot my daughter made. I think the rustic texture of the tiny teapot complements the wild beauty of the flowers. The henbit takes center stage, but the few long stems of white clover add a nice accent to the arrangement. No dandelions today. Their flowers are gone to seed, and the lawnmower will distribute them for future gatherings. I stand back and look. It is really quite beautiful, I think, in a wild sort of way.

* * *

I was not a wild child. I was four years younger than my middle brother and seven years younger than the firstborn. By the time I was old enough to talk and play, it was just Mama and me at home, and that meant I was often alone. I either went outside where I would not be underfoot, or I played quietly in my room. If I went outside, I had to be careful. If I wandered too far away, I would get in trouble. If I got too muddy or wet, I would get in trouble. If I got hungry and ate too many of the green apples, I would get in trouble—and have a stomach ache to boot. Inside had its own perils, of course. If I was too loud or too rambunctious, I would get in trouble. If I stayed too close, I would be shooed away.

Inside, especially on days when I did not have a choice—when it was too rainy or too cold to venture out, I would get bored. I learned to improvise in my play, but that also led to problems. Instead of pretending to be the mother of my baby doll, I pretended I was the nurse who was taking care of her as she lay dying in the hospital. Instead of bathing the plastic figures of Teddy and Elephant, I tugged off their heads and poured the soapy water back and forth, back and forth between body and head. One shelf of the etagere was mine, and I did read the tattered

books there, but I also had a wonderful game where I pulled them all off in a mad rush, then slowly placed them back in a neat row, pretending they had preferences for who they were between and who was far away.

I was never reprimanded for most of the games, but she didn't like them. She would ask what I was doing, and she would look at me in a funny way. Sometimes, she would tell me to stop doing whatever I was doing. The look was much worse, though. I didn't know how to interpret it, so I just felt bad, odd, wrong. Of course, I don't know how she really felt. Even if I had ever found the courage to ask, I doubt her answer would have been wholly true. I do know what she didn't feel.

Every so often, we would drive thirty minutes away to visit my grandmother and great aunt. At first, it was every week, but when my aunt and her daughters moved in, the visits became further apart, and sometimes, the whole family would go. My aunt was always nice to me. She was a nurse, and I thought that was why she would spend time with me, telling me stories and occasional hugs. I remember one day in particular, sitting in the long room where my aunt and her daughters slept. It was a sunny room now, with too many beds and bright posters of cartoon flowers and rock stars on the wall. My aunt and her daughters were folding or sorting clothes. Maybe they were fresh from the line. Maybe they were going to give me hand-me-downs. I don't remember because that wasn't what held my attention.

It was the beauty of the moment. They were all three beautiful women, although my cousins were just on the cusp of womanhood. Aunt Noreen was petite like my grandmother, and her dark hair was silky smooth, and her skin was soft and fashionably tan. When she gave me hugs, she always smelled so good. Both of her daughters were blond, and they wore their hair long and straight. The younger of the two was also petite and delicate like an elf, and she had a

natural streak of grey-white hair which I found fascinating. My older cousin was a bit taller, but still thin. Her hair was more golden, and her eyes were large and striking. They all wore the brightly-colored clothes that were fashionable in the late 60s and early 70s, and they looked like a TV show, standing there in the middle of the crowded room.

But that wasn't the beauty that compelled me. It was the laughter between them. I couldn't grasp it; I couldn't look away. As I sat on the periphery of the activity, I tried to become as still and invisible as I could be. I didn't want to interrupt the magic of the moment.

They stood together, pulling out clothes, talking and teasing each other. My aunt looked so young, even though she was just a few years younger than my mother. As she chatted with my cousins, the teasing note in her voice and her girlish laughter made her seem barely older than her daughters. At one point, someone tossed one of the shirts at someone else, and then it was a game, a free-for-all of tossing clothes and poking and tickling. But no one grew angry or irritated. It was quickly over, but magical in its spontaneity and joy.

As they settled back down and took up the folding again, I watched my aunt, her eyes still crinkled at the corner with humor and the mischief of the moment, and I saw it there—the magic that had created this moment and nurtured its beauty. Even though I was still too young to understand all of it, I understood that there was love there, and acceptance and so much more. Her daughters were important to her. She was happy to be there, doing something so mundane, because she was with them. I was too young to understand all of what was going on in that room, but I was old enough to know that this was what I wanted when I brought Mama flowers, that this was what I longed for.

“I wish you were my mama,” I whispered, forgetting that I was actually in the room. May aunt turned to me, and I realized I had spoken those words out loud. I was sad because I had ruined the moment.

“What did you say, honey?”

“Nothing,” I said, not wanting to ruin things further. Her expression changed then, and she moved toward me. Looking back, I am sure there was pity there. Perhaps, there was understanding or an acknowledgement that there was something missing in my life, and she understood how that felt. In that moment, I wanted to tell her, so I did. “I just wish you were my mother.”

She reached out and touched my hair, smoothing it down around my head. “I wish I were your mother, too,” she said.

And then her expression changed again, and I saw something like anger in her eyes. She turned her head toward the door. “Betty, come here a minute,” she called out.

“No, don’t tell—” I tried to say, but it was too late. Mama stood in the doorway, and I felt panic rise up in me. I looked at my cousins, but the older of the two was not looking at anyone. She just kept on folding the clothes. The younger met my eyes, but she was no help. ‘Mine,’ she said with no words. ‘Not your mother. Mine.’

I was trapped and afraid, and as my aunt told my mother what I had said, I knew that I had hurt my mama. I knew I would never be able to make her see that it wasn’t that I didn’t love her. It was just that I had suddenly realized that she didn’t love me—at least not in the way my aunt loved my cousins, not in the way I needed her to.

I don’t remember much about what else happened that day. I know there were angry words between my mother and my aunt--one cousin ignoring it all, while the other glared at me,

confirming that it was all my fault. On the way home, there were questions from my mother, from my father to my mother, from my brothers, who hadn't known something had happened and wanted to hear it all. I was too young to explain it. I didn't know how to make it right.

I was afraid because I knew that I had damaged something. I wanted to blame my aunt, but I was the one who had said the words. I didn't understand why she had told my mama, but she had been kind to me, so I made up reasons while the boys and my mother and father talked around me. Maybe she wanted my mother to play with me like she did with her children. Maybe my mother had been unkind to her, and she was just trying to get back at her.

Maybe she had hoped that my Mama and Daddy would give me to her, and I could stay there with her and my grandmother and my great aunt and my cousins. Part of me was terrified at the idea of it, but part of me wondered if it would be nice. But I would miss my daddy and my brothers and my mama.

When we visited the next time, I avoided my aunt and cousins. Instead, I stayed with my mama as she helped with chores. And when we were home, I continued to bring her flowers, and she took them with a thank you and an almost smile.

* * *

Years later, I was scraping plates after dinner. I was big enough to see down into the tall kitchen trash can, and as I scraped, I noticed petals below some papers. I reached in and pulled the debris away, only then realizing that I was looking at the bouquet I had given my mother earlier that day. I stared at them for a long time.

I don't think I cried.

I was sad. I was disappointed.

Mainly, though, I was embarrassed. All this time, I had not realized that she didn't like my bouquets. All this time, I hadn't noticed that they were not on the supper table or window sill. All this time, those flowers had never even made it into a drinking glass full of water. They had gone into the trash, covered over with paper so I wouldn't know. I felt stupid, and I remembered my aunt's eyes as she looked at her daughters. I wondered if she would have ever thrown away a bouquet given to her by one of her girls.

* * *

I have my own home now, and I have flowers here. I have a variety of perennials in my yard. Day lilies and lilac. Hydrangeas and tulips. If I do break down and buy annuals for my scattered containers, I often forget to water them. My husband takes care of them for me, and I love that he is willing to pamper them and make them grow so I can enjoy the splashes of color on our porch.

But what I love even more is that he understands that they are not the only flowers I love, and he has willingly given up on ever having the perfect yard. We make the neighbors happy with a more conventional front yard, but the back yard is ours, and patches of dandelions are nurtured, not destroyed. Henbit grows in the shelter of the large crimson azalea that greets us as we go out the door, and tiny violets, clover, and unnamed varieties of wild are scattered throughout the Bermuda grass. There are no weeds there, just my childhood flowers. The ones that grow without pampering, that are left to find their own way among the stalks of grass, the ones that are beautiful just the same.